VIEWPOINT

Paharis of Chenab Valley Meet the Lokur Committee Criteria

An ethnological and statistical case for Scheduled Tribe recognition in erstwhile Doda

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The question of tribal identification in India has long been shaped by the interplay of anthropology, constitutional law, and socio-economic realities. Among the most influential frameworks in this regard are the criteria formulated by the Lokur Committee, which continue to guide the recognition of Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

These criteria, including primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact, and socio-economic backwardness, were intended to capture the structural conditions of historically marginalised communities.

In the context of Jammu and Kashmir, the Chenab Valley region, historically known as erstwhile Doda and now comprising Doda, Kishtwar, and Ramban, presents a compelling case for analysis. The region is predominantly inhabited by Pahari-speaking populations whose identity is shaped by mountainous geography, linguistic diversity, and traditional livelihood systems.

Ethnological evidence and statistical data on the Paharis of this region make a compelling case for their recognition under the Lokur Committee criteria.

Linguistic & Cultural Continuity

The term “Pahari,” derived from ‘*pahar*’ meaning mountain, denotes populations inhabiting hilly terrains rather than a single ethnic or religious group. In erstwhile Doda, the Pahari identity represents a socio-cultural continuum encompassing multiple communities united by shared ecological conditions and cultural practices. This identity transcends religious divisions and is instead rooted in a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

Linguistically, the region is characterised by a cluster of dialects belonging to the Western Pahari group, including Bhaderwahi, Bhalesi, Sarazi, Kishtwari, Pogali, Zundhari, Khashali, Rudhari and Padari. These dialects function as primary markers of identity and are deeply embedded in oral traditions, folklore, and everyday communication.

However, census classifications fragment this linguistic continuum, often recording these dialects separately or subsuming them under Hindi, thereby obscuring the true extent of the Pahari-speaking population. Empirical evidence suggests that when these dialects are considered collectively, they represent a substantial proportion, even a majority, of the population.
The cultural life of erstwhile Doda is marked by a high degree of distinctiveness shaped by geography and historical continuity. Traditional practices related to dress, architecture, food, and rituals reflect adaptation to mountainous conditions and reliance on local resources. Wooden and stone houses, wool-based clothing, and agricultural festivals tied to seasonal cycles are integral aspects of this cultural system.

The linguistic diversity of the region further reinforces this distinctiveness. Despite administrative fragmentation, the dialects of the Chenab Valley share structural similarities and form a cohesive linguistic continuum.

The persistence of oral traditions, including folk songs and storytelling, ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. These features collectively establish a cultural identity that is clearly distinguishable from surrounding regions, satisfying the Lokur criterion of distinctiveness.

Indigenous Practices
The first criterion identified by the Lokur Committee, historically described as primitive traits, is more appropriately understood in contemporary terms as the persistence of traditional subsistence systems and ecological adaptation.

In erstwhile Doda, the economic structure is overwhelmingly based on subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, and forest dependence. The rugged terrain limits mechanisation and industrial development, necessitating reliance on indigenous agricultural practices.

A defining feature of this system is the seasonal migration of communities and livestock to high-altitude pastures known as *dhoks*. This practice reflects a sophisticated adaptation to environmental constraints, allowing optimal use of resources across different ecological zones. The continued prevalence of transhumance, combined with the absence of large-scale industrialisation, demonstrates the persistence of a pre-modern economic structure that aligns closely with the Lokur framework.

Geographical isolation is perhaps the most visible characteristic of the Chenab Valley. The region is defined by rugged Himalayan terrain, deep valleys, and limited connectivity, with many areas remaining inaccessible

during winter due to snowfall and landslides. This physical isolation has historically restricted interaction with external populations and limited access to development.

Statistical indicators reinforce this reality, as more than 90 to 96 percent of the population resides in rural areas, reflecting minimal urbanization and persistent spatial isolation. The lack of all-weather roads, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and scattered settlement patterns further contribute to this condition.

Geographical isolation thus operates as a structural determinant that shapes economic, social, and cultural life in the region.

Social and Economic Indicators

The Lokur Committee's criterion of shyness of contact is best interpreted as limited external integration resulting from historical isolation.

In erstwhile Doda, this is evident in the continued dominance of kinship-based social organisation and the prevalence of endogamous marriage practices. Communities rely heavily on customary institutions and local councils for governance and dispute resolution, reflecting a preference for internal mechanisms over external intervention.

The relatively slow integration into broader socio-economic networks is not indicative of cultural reluctance but rather a consequence of geographical and infrastructural constraints. This pattern of limited interaction aligns with the Lokur framework when understood in a modern sociological context.

The final criterion of socio-economic backwardness is strongly supported by empirical data. Literacy rates in the region are below national averages, with Doda at approximately 64.68 percent, Kishtwar at 56.20 percent, and Ramban at 54.27 percent. Female literacy rates are significantly lower, at around 50 percent, 42 percent, and 38 percent respectively, indicating pronounced gender disparity.

Economic indicators reveal a lack of industrial development, limited employment opportunities, and high dependence on agriculture and livestock. Infrastructure deficits, including inadequate healthcare facilities, poor road connectivity, and limited access to higher education, further exacerbate these conditions.

These measurable factors collectively demonstrate a pattern of structural deprivation consistent with the Lokur Committee's definition of backwardness.

Using Lokur Committee Lens

The case of erstwhile Doda presents a comprehensive convergence of all five criteria outlined by the Lokur Committee. The region exhibits a distinct Pahari identity rooted in linguistic and cultural continuity, a traditional economy characterized by subsistence practices and transhumance, a high degree of geographical isolation, limited integration with external systems, and clear indicators of socio-economic backwardness supported by statistical data.

This convergence is not incidental but reflects a deeply embedded structural reality shaped by geography, history, and socio-economic conditions. When evaluated within the constitutional framework of Article 342, the Chenab Valley emerges as a region whose characteristics align closely with those of recognised Scheduled Tribes in India.

The evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, provides a strong analytical foundation for understanding the Pahari communities of erstwhile Doda as a distinct and historically marginalized group deserving of recognition within the broader framework of tribal policy and constitutional justice.